

## CHAPTER VII

### NORTH CAROLINA'S COMMODITY ALTERNATIVE BENEFIT PROGRAM

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The North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services was one of two grantees that selected an alternative commodity benefit model to increase elderly participation in the FSP for the elderly nutrition demonstration. The state agency relied on the local Department of Social Services (DSS) and two community service providers to implement the initiative, which was known locally as the Commodity Alternative Benefit (CAB) program. Instead of EBT food stamp benefits, seniors could choose a monthly food package distributed from a central warehouse. In addition to canned items, cold storage facilities enabled the program to offer butter, cheese, and frozen meat and poultry to clients.

#### OPERATIONAL DETAILS

##### Mechanics of Services

Alamance County, which was selected as the demonstration site for the CAB program, is served by the local DSS office in Burlington, the largest city in the county. DSS has simplified procedures for seniors who apply for food stamps. Eligibility interviews usually can be scheduled the same day for walk-in applicants, and caseworkers use alternative procedures for elderly residents who face barriers in traveling to the Burlington office. Few changes were made to FSP procedures as a result of the demonstration. DSS staff collaborate with two community partners for the demonstration—the Alamance County Community Services Agency (ACCSA) and the Vocational Trades of Alamance (VTA).

**FSP Characteristics in the Absence of the Demonstration.** North Carolina uses a two-page food stamp application for all age groups. This application can be downloaded from the agency's website. Most applicants in Alamance County, including seniors, apply in person at the local DSS office in Burlington. Caseworkers frequently conduct the face-to-face eligibility interviews that same day, with a waiting time of 30 to 45 minutes. During the half-hour eligibility interview, caseworkers verify income, assets, rent or mortgage payments,

utilities, and medical expenses. If additional verification paperwork is needed, staff compile a list of items and instruct applicants to submit the documentation by mail, fax, or in person.

Applicants also can request a food stamp application by phone and submit it to DSS by mail. If seniors encounter any barriers that prevent them from traveling to the Burlington office (for example, having a medical condition or not having transportation), caseworkers can use their discretion in employing an alternative solution. Two options consist of (1) conducting a home visit to do the interview in person or (2) waiving the face-to-face interview and conducting it by telephone. Given the general time constraints of staff, caseworkers prefer the latter option, since it entails less time away from the office. Recertification cases, which take place annually, still require a face-to-face interview. Seniors who face significant access barriers can receive a home visit to recertify.

**Changes in FSP Policies and Procedures.** Overall, procedures for processing food stamp applications underwent minimal changes. Caseworkers offered the commodity benefit option only to new applicants and recertifying seniors who qualified for less than \$70 in food stamp benefits.<sup>1</sup> Some staff also tried to informally screen out seniors who would not have been viable candidates by asking questions about their cooking habits. For example, they determined whether the person primarily ate frozen meals or prepares home-cooked meals. Furthermore, DSS staff in Burlington also coordinated case management with community service providers, as described in the next section.

**CAB Case Management.** The local DSS office worked with ACCSA and VTA to ensure that the appropriate clients either registered for commodities or transferred to EBT benefits if necessary. The close proximity of ACCSA to the Burlington office helped facilitate the sharing of critical information. Moreover, within the first year of operations, one caseworker was assigned to serve as the primary contact for demonstration program staff and handle all CAB clients.

If a senior selected the commodities option, a caseworker flagged him or her in the DSS database and forwarded the contact information to ACCSA. Caseworkers distributed lists of new enrollees at least once a week, with ACCSA receiving a master list once a month. The agency compared names of new clients with the most current master list to verify who had dropped out of the program. The ACCSA program manager called the new enrollees to welcome them to the program and explain the food distribution progress. While home delivery was an option, it was not explicitly offered to clients. However, if clients indicated that they could not participate because of transportation, ACCSA made home deliveries.

The program manager also called those seniors who no longer were enrolled in the FSP because they had failed to meet the recertification deadline. Many CAB participants did not recertify, since they assumed that they were exempt from this requirement. Consequently, the program manager emphasized to clients that they still had to recertify for food stamps

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<sup>1</sup> Seventy dollars was the average amount that seniors would spend if they were to purchase the food items contained in the commodity packages at a local grocery store.

and encouraged them to call their caseworker for an interview in order to continue receiving commodities.<sup>2</sup>

If seniors wanted to transfer to EBT benefits, they either informed their caseworkers directly or notified ACCSA, who in turn ensured that DSS received the information. Caseworkers reclassified those participants in the agency's database who had left the demonstration, and activated their EBT cards for the following month.

**Contents of the Commodity Packages.** Seniors received one of two food package types each month. Packages varied slightly in terms of items and/or quantities (for example, two versus three cans of pears, and one can of tuna versus no tuna). Each monthly delivery consisted of six bags; the larger number of bags reduced the weight per bag, and this helped make carrying the food deliveries easier for the elderly. Five bags contained canned foods, and one bag contained butter, cheese, and frozen meat and poultry. Together, the six bags weighed between 72 and 75 pounds. It would have cost about \$70 to purchase all of the contents in either of these packages at the local supermarket (Cody and Ohls, 2005).

**Commodity Storage and Procurement.** Like the demonstration in Connecticut, the CAB model in North Carolina required a lot of preparation before food distribution could begin. First, the ACCSA worked with USDA to approve food baskets that met the dietary requirements of the food pyramid.<sup>3</sup> Then, it purchased equipment for VTA to store the commodities. The organization had a warehouse facility with certain equipment, including storage racks and tow motors, but still needed to purchase a freezer, refrigerators, a back-up generator, and a van. It should be noted that even with ample capacity, VTA did not have enough storage space when the first commodity shipment arrived, as it mistakenly included twice the amount of food that was ordered. Staff were not prepared to store the additional refrigerated and frozen items. Fortunately, VTA was able to secure the cooperation of the local school district, which allowed the organization to temporarily store the spillover inventory in its facilities. Having such a back-up contingency plan was critical, especially since the commodity packages included perishable items.

With the necessary equipment ordered, VTA established a system for receiving, sorting, storing, and assembling food at its warehouse, and also placed the first commodity order with USDA. It initially received a half truckload of commodities from USDA every other

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<sup>2</sup> From time to time the program manager conducted a home visit to explain the recertification process if seniors were particularly confused, reasoning that face-to-face conversations more effectively conveyed information than telephone conversations.

<sup>3</sup> The first commodity package that was designed by a local food bank—the initial community partner that would have been in charge of commodity acquisition and distribution but dropped out before the demonstration began—was based on prior client preferences and contained a high proportion of meat and cheese. USDA rejected this first food package because it lacked nutritional balance. Consequently, program planners modified the commodity package under VTA to include poultry and meat, as well as additional types of food items to achieve more variety from the four food groups.

month, with orders being placed two months in advance. VTA became somewhat frustrated because they could only purchase a half truckload of food at a time, which meant that only certain foods could be ordered in a given month. Furthermore, sometimes specific items were not available from UDSA when the order was placed. Thus, considerable planning was involved in terms of which types of foods to order in advance so that VTA could have them in stock for future distribution. During the second year, VTA started to order full truckloads of food every other month to be more efficient and able to order a wider variety of food items at any one time.

Commodity deliveries arrived during the first two weeks of each month, which is why program staff decided to schedule food distribution for week three. VTA workers<sup>4</sup> unloaded the food, separated it into commodity groups (for example, fruits, vegetables), and placed items on storage shelves in the warehouse, with newer items on the top shelves. Perishable foods were placed into refrigerators and freezers. Packages (five bags for each elderly participant) were assembled in advance of pickup using items from the bottom storage shelves first; frozen and refrigerated items were put into the sixth bag on the day of pickup or delivery. Processing each delivery was a time-consuming task. It took 15 VTA workers approximately four days to unload the truck, sort the items, and assemble food bags with non-perishable items. Nevertheless, because VTA had a large number of workers overall, it always had several workers on hand to assist with receiving, storing, and assembling the commodities, as well as distributing them.

**Food Distribution.** Using a single distribution pick-up site model, CAB participants (or their designated representatives) picked up their commodity packages every third Tuesday and Wednesday at VTA's warehouse in downtown Burlington. At their first pickup after enrollment, seniors received an identification card and a schedule of distribution dates for the calendar year. Individuals drove up to the receiving dock, where VTA workers loaded the food (contained in several grocery bags) into vehicles. Staff could accommodate about 13 cars per hour. The weight of food bags was not an issue since seniors usually had a friend or relative assisting them.<sup>5</sup> If seniors missed a pickup, they could either come to the warehouse the following day or make arrangements with VTA to come on a non-designated food distribution day. The program manager called those households that did not contact the organization by the end of the month to coordinate a pickup. Over time, the manager recognized which clients would benefit from a reminder call.

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<sup>4</sup> VTA is a nonprofit rehabilitation agency that gives employment opportunities and services to mentally- and physically-challenged adults. VTA staff who handled food packages were called "VTA clients." To avoid confusion when referring to food stamp clients, this profile identifies VTA clients as "workers."

<sup>5</sup> Program staff estimated that approximately 30 percent of commodity pickups were received by the client alone, 30 percent by the client accompanied by a friend or relative, and 40 percent by a designated representative of the client.

Home delivery was available to those clients who could not easily access the warehouse. While program staff did not advertise this service, they were liberal in approving home delivery if a senior inquired about it, or if staff easily detected a barrier such as physical immobility. ACCSA estimated that approximately one-third of all demonstration clients took advantage of this home-delivery service. Common delivery locations tended to be in more rural and remote areas, as well as senior housing complexes. A van was equipped with a portable cooler to safely transport frozen food items. At each stop, six bags were placed in a plastic container, and the driver brought the containers into the home and put the food away at the senior's request. In the rare event that a client was not home, a neighbor met the driver or staff returned at a later time.

As was the case with processing USDA commodity deliveries at the warehouse, home delivery runs were time consuming. The van held enough food bags for 24 seniors, which meant that completing an entire delivery cycle took two full days. Staff also called home-delivery households in advance to notify them of the date and general time-frame for package delivery.

### **Major Stakeholders and Roles**

Four primary stakeholders from the public and non-profit sectors were involved in the demonstration. These included the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) at the state level, the Alamance County Division of Social Services (DSS), the Alamance County Community Services Agency (ACCSA), and Vocational Trades of Alamance (VTA).<sup>6</sup>

Representatives from the DHHS office in Raleigh decided to apply for the USDA grant and spearheaded preparing the application. The agency contributed to the decision-making process in the planning phase and broadly oversaw the demonstration. Staff from DSS in Alamance County gave input on the grant application and the demonstration's design. While DSS did not officially receive and disperse grant dollars through its office, it served as the main intermediary between the state agency and the community partners. FSP managers provided guidance to ACCSA as needed and delivered training to the subcontractors on food stamp policies. DSS caseworkers assisted ACCSA with outreach and collaborated with them on case management.

Two local organizations were responsible for service provision and public education efforts. A community action program with past experience in collaborating with the county, ACCSA runs congregate meal sites and an emergency food pantry. The agency administered the demonstration, which included coordinating case management efforts with DSS, leading outreach efforts, and preparing quarterly reports for DHHS. Specifically, the program manager conducted community-based outreach (for example, presentations at senior

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<sup>6</sup> ACCSA and VTA replaced the Loaves & Fishes Christian Food Ministry, the original subcontractor for the grant. This transition is addressed in subsequent sections.

centers), handled administrative duties, and interfaced with clients to ensure a seamless enrollment process.

The VTA subcontracted with area businesses to perform light assembly, packaging, sorting and inspection work. The VTA has an expansive 87,000 square foot facility that can accommodate multiple “jobs” simultaneously. For instance, during one visit by the research team, VTA workers in one section of the facility were packaging kits for making quilts, and workers in another section were packaging medical products, while a handful of other workers helped load commodity packages into seniors’ cars during pickup. This organization played a central role in the demonstration. VTA workers unloaded USDA commodity trucks, sorted and stored food, assembled commodity packages, and loaded packages into seniors’ cars. The cost of these VTA services amounted to \$5 per commodity package. Because VTA was the pickup location, community members directly associated it with the CAB program.

### **Management Structure and Lines of Authority**

The core decision-making team consisted of representatives from DHHS, DSS in Alamance County, and ACCSA, although the state office in Raleigh had ultimate authority over the program. The director of the ACCSA oversaw two staff members who worked full-time on the day-to-day operations, one of whom worked on-site at VTA to facilitate communication and cooperation between the two community-based organizations. County food stamp staff retained control over FSP policies and procedures. (North Carolina’s FSP is county-based, so many policy decisions are made at the local level.)

### **Means of Communication and Related Issues**

Overall, relations between the various stakeholders and with CAB participants were quite positive. ACCSA communicates frequently with the local food stamp office, which was conveniently located one block away. The two groups had worked together in the past on other initiatives, which helped establish a good working relationship and allowed them to more easily coordinate activities for the demonstration. In September 2003, a DSS supervisor assigned one caseworker to handle demonstration clients and streamline procedures. ACCSA and VTA communicated regularly as well, most notably due to one ACCSA employee who worked part-time for the demonstration on site at VTA’s headquarters.

In addition, program staff strove to maintain good communication with seniors. ACCSA staff telephoned all new clients to welcome them personally to the demonstration, explain the rules and procedures for obtaining commodities, and determine if home delivery was necessary. These personal touches helped promote smooth operations and minimize confusion for seniors.

## Training

Program officials arranged for training to prepare stakeholders for the commodities benefit option. First, Second Harvest food bank staff delivered a session on food handling, safety, and distribution to the two primary staff members from ACCSA. They also relayed relevant information to the VTA workers who handle the commodity packages.

In addition, ACCSA met with front-line workers and their supervisors at the county office in Burlington. Staff gave an overview of the CAB program, while caseworkers talked about food stamp policies and procedures, as well as how they would transfer current FSP clients who chose the commodity benefit option. To gain a better understanding of DSS procedures, the ACCSA program manager spent several hours a few weeks before the demonstration began observing caseworkers process food stamp applications.

## Outreach Strategies

ACCSA conducted outreach efforts to the community using a variety of methods. It also relied on caseworkers to inform new FSP applicants and those seniors up for recertification about the commodity benefit option. Before the demonstration, DSS had not conducted much FSP outreach, and applications were available only at the county office in Burlington.<sup>7</sup>

**Core Themes and Methods.** Based on outreach conducted within the first several months using community presentations and media venues, the program manager from ACCSA concluded that in-person contact was the most effective means of informing seniors about and generating their interest in the demonstration. This was primarily because staff could immediately answer questions and address concerns that seniors may have had. For example, during the first MPR site visit, evaluators learned that two community presentations to groups of 25 attendees resulted in about a dozen seniors applying to the CAB program. Presentations also generated dozens of phone inquiries to DSS and ACCSA each month.

In contrast, program officials did not find multi media to be particularly effective. Some seniors who lived in the more rural, remote regions of Alamance County did not subscribe to the local newspaper. Moreover, not all seniors subscribed to cable television, which was how the public service announcements were broadcast. Thus, after an initial wave of television segments, newspaper articles, and dissemination of brochures throughout the county during the first several months, staff relied on community presentations as the primary means of public education.

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<sup>7</sup> ACCSA stopped promoting the CAB program in the summer of 2004. Because the demonstration was due to end in the fall of 2004, staff did not want to encourage seniors to join a program that was to end several months later. Clients who inquired on their own, however, were still able to enroll.

**Written Materials.** ACCSA designed the demonstration's brochures and posters. Even before operations officially began, ACCSA staff distributed materials to all senior centers and public housing agencies in Alamance County, as well as to the local DSS office. In addition, DSS mailed letters to 373 food stamp clients to notify them about the commodity benefit option. During the course of the demonstration, ACCSA also sent materials to churches, senior housing sites, community-based organizations, medical clinics and hospitals, Meals on Wheels service providers, food pantries, pharmacies, and fast food restaurants. In April 2003, VTA inserted copies of a cookbook entitled *Recipe Tips for Healthy, Thrifty Meals* into the food packages to help seniors make best use of their commodities.

**Community Networking.** As previously discussed, making local presentations at sites that the elderly were likely to frequent was the preferred outreach method for the demonstration. The ACCSA program manager routinely visited places such as churches (where food pantries are often located), senior centers, and apartment complexes. While there were no data to create a causal link between outreach method and enrollment in the CAB program, staff observed that the presentations did generate food stamp applications. For example, they reported that five presentations during the first quarter of the demonstration generated 45 FSP applicants.<sup>8</sup>

Aside from presentations, program staff established a presence in the community through other sponsored events. Staff hosted an information booth at a county-wide festival, and disseminated brochures and accepted food stamp applications at the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program's annual sign-up, which rotates to different public intake sites during a two-week period.

**Multi Media.** Program staff concentrated on publicizing the CAB program to the media in its earlier stages. Before operations began, ACCSA sent a press release to the local newspaper and cable television station, while DSS contacted media outlets in the county to announce the commodity benefit option. Articles featuring the commodity benefit option appeared in the newspaper every three months, and caseworkers reported that telephone inquiries to DSS increased within the first few days after an article was published. In addition, for the first several months, program staff arranged for television coverage of seniors picking up commodities at VTA's warehouse, and the Burlington office recorded a 30-second video describing the commodity program for a cable television show called *At Your Service*.

**Community Collaborations.** ACCSA took steps to cultivate other means of reaching seniors through creative partnerships but met with little success. Program staff worked hard to set up agreements with local restaurants and fast food chains to use a tray liner advertising the CAB program. By the summer of 2003, ACCSA had produced thousands of liners and four eating establishments were using them. However, by the second year, the advertising campaign had only taken hold in a few businesses due to limitations placed on local

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<sup>8</sup> From the October to December 2002 quarterly report submitted by the Alamance County Department of Social Services to the USDA Food and Nutrition Service.



franchises by corporate headquarters. ACCSA noted that few seniors seemed to inquire about the demonstration as a result of the tray liners.

### **Staffing Turnover and Related Issues**

The most significant staffing change occurred when the original contracted service provider, the Loaves & Fishes Christian Food Ministry, severed its contract with DHHS in the summer of 2002. Originally, this non-profit organization intended to oversee the demonstration at the local level and take responsibility for food storage and distribution. Loaves & Fishes withdrew from the grant due to conflicts over the timeliness of reimbursements and federal reporting requirements. Eventually, ACCSA assumed the overseeing role and contracted with VTA to manage food operations.

Moderate staff shortages, not turnover, were an initial concern at the local county DSS office. During the first site visit, 3 out of 13 caseworker slots were vacant, and caseloads were rising. At that time, front-line staff did not then perceive the demonstration to be a burden, especially since over the first several months the program manager from ACCSA helped prepare food stamp applications for some seniors, which were error free. Early on, the Burlington office expressed some reservations about its capacity to handle additional FSP applications resulting from the CAB program, considering that it was short three caseworkers. However, this never became an issue. The DSS supervisor estimated that between 400 and 500 would be the maximum number of CAB clients that the office could manage and still meet its 30-day case processing deadline. The highest number of demonstration participants in a given month was less than 300.

A full-time ACCSA staff member resigned in March 2004. As a critical player in the commodities benefit option, this person's absence could have caused a significant disruption if it had occurred earlier. Yet since operations had been smoothly running for almost a year and a half, other program staff divided his duties for the remainder of the demonstration.

### **Major Operational Changes During the Demonstration**

Few changes occurred in the CAB program, although program staff implemented a few modifications to facilitate procedures. ACCSA also abandoned its plan to consult a nutritionist. The most significant alteration, however, involved eliminating application assistance that the program manager provided to seniors.

**Termination of Application Assistance.** The most notable change during the demonstration involved the provision of application assistance beyond its scope. Within the first few months, the program manager from ACCSA began helping some seniors complete the food stamp application after delivering public talks about the commodity benefit option. He frequently made arrangements to bring food stamp applications to seniors' homes, helped them fill out the paperwork, collected the necessary documentation, and submitted the packets to DSS. In other cases, he met with seniors at senior center or church halls. The manager adopted this practice because he worried that many elderly would fall through the cracks and choose not to follow through and apply because they felt overwhelmed and

confused by the paperwork. However, upon learning about this practice in 2003, FNS asked him to stop delivering any service that resembled the application assistance model so that the commodity model could be compared with the application assistance model without overlap. DSS staff and the ACCSA director estimated that 15 to 20 percent of the first 213 CAB clients received some help in applying for food stamps.

**Facilitated Case Management Procedures.** After about 10 months of operations, the supervisor in the Burlington office decided to assign one caseworker to manage all FSP applicants (or current enrollees) who selected the commodity benefit option. Representatives from the community partners found it easier to coordinate efforts and communicate with one person at DSS instead of 13 front-line staff members.

**Nutritional Consultant.** During the planning phase, ACCSA had planned to hire a nutritionist to examine the commodity packages and offer suggestions that would be appropriate for senior clients with diabetes. In the end, staff did not think that this was necessary because few changes were ever made to the packages.

## DESIGNING THE DEMONSTRATION

### Program Design

The principal goal of North Carolina's CAB program was to increase elderly participation rates in the FSP by offering food packages as a substitute for EBT benefits. Program officials hoped that monthly commodity baskets worth \$70 in groceries would interest those seniors who would have qualified only for the minimum benefit level, or perhaps a bit higher.

**Who Was Involved and How It Unfolded.** State officials from the DHHS office in Raleigh selected Alamance County as the site of the demonstration because (1) the local DSS office had garnered the support of an experienced local food bank that could easily apply as the food distributor (Loaves & Fishes), (2) state officials were interested in testing the program in a rural location, and (3) DSS had ongoing experience operating the Commodity Supplemental Food Program.

State officials from the Economic Independence Division within DHHS obtained letters of support and prepared the grant application, with input from the DSS office in Alamance County. The county staff took the lead on designing a commodities model, with feedback from DHHS, modified its database to track demonstration clients, and developed outreach materials. DSS then invited the Loaves & Fishes Christian Food Ministry to join the grant as the food distributor.

To prepare for food storage and distribution and ensure that its facilities and infrastructure could accommodate the CAB program, staff ordered office equipment and equipment needed for food storage (for example, a freezer), installed shelving in its warehouse, and constructed a loading ramp. Representatives from Loaves & Fishes

consulted a nutritionist to develop the contents for three packages, also basing the contents on customer demand from its food bank (specifically, a lot of meat and cheese).

Although these preparations proceeded smoothly, Loaves & Fishes decided to withdraw from the contract in April 2002, shortly before the demonstration was originally slated to begin. It offered two reasons for severing ties with the grantee. First, it believed the local DSS office did not reimburse the organization in a timely manner for expenses incurred. Second, it did not agree with the state's decision to switch from a purchase-of-service contract to a financial services contract, which would have required more auditing responsibilities from the subcontractor. In the end, Loaves & Fishes concluded that the whole process was too frustrating and costly to continue, despite having received its first payment in early April. Other stakeholders attributed these frustrations to Loaves & Fishes' lack of experience working under contract to a government entity.

County officials immediately took steps to replace the subcontractor. It turned to ACCSA, with whom it had worked previously and who had substantial experience delivering services to the elderly, such as running congregate meal sites. The agency obtained approval from its board of directors and collaborated closely with DSS to prepare and resubmit a revised proposal to FNS within six weeks. It revised two of the three original packages designed by Loaves & Fishes to meet USDA's criteria that the commodity option must constitute a nutritionally balanced food basket.

Through its community connections, ACCSA identified and hired the VTA to handle food distribution. VTA is a non-profit community rehabilitation program providing vocational evaluation, adult developmental vocational programming, work adjustment training, sheltered employment, and job placement services to persons with disabilities. VTA appealed to the other partners because it already had a spacious warehouse that could easily accommodate short-term spikes in demand for commodities. Moreover, the program has a large pool of clients to draw upon for assembling and loading food packages. Importantly, it had experience with government contracts.

Over the next few months, before a revised start date of November 2002, the three local partners made final implementation preparations. Core program staff from DSS, ACCSA, and VTA collaborated to develop protocols for case management and home delivery. ACCSA ordered the commodities and purchased commercial-grade refrigerators and freezers, home delivery coolers, and a van. The agency also designed an identification card for seniors, as well as signs to post at the central warehouse to facilitate food distribution and pickup. As official operations were getting underway, ACCSA installed and tested an emergency generator to avoid food spoilage.

### **Changes to the Design in Hindsight**

Food distribution ran relatively smoothly throughout the demonstration and did not require any modifications. However, a few changes regarding publicity and education might have made service delivery more effective overall.

First, program officials could have developed a more targeted outreach strategy in the outlying rural areas of Alamance County. During the planning phase, DSS and ACCSA selected a handful of locations that essentially would have served as satellite distribution sites. Seniors could drive to these sites to pick up food packages at a given time and day each month, just as clients did at the warehouse in Burlington. However, staff decided not to activate these sites until they could identify a minimum number of interested clients in a particular geographic area. For example, it would not have been cost-effective to establish a satellite distribution point for five participants. Reaching potential clients in remote areas is more challenging since there are fewer, if any, public spaces where people congregate, such as community centers. In the end, they concluded that there was no need for an outreach post. At the same time, they never launched a publicity campaign that could have determined whether this was the case.

Second, staff could have incorporated more nutrition education into the CAB program. ACCSA had intended to place more emphasis on nutrition education. Specifically, they wanted to teach seniors how commodities could meet any special dietary needs (for example, diabetes or heart disease). For example, a nutrition consultant could have compiled a pamphlet with tips for food preparation, such as rinsing canned fruits to remove excess sugar. However, this component was never fully developed. Some responses from the customer satisfaction survey suggest that seniors would have benefited from such guidance.

## **COMMUNITY CONTEXT**

The fact that Alamance County is rural was an important factor that influenced implementation of the CAB program. The rural nature of the county also could help explain the high levels of enrollment in the CAB program. The DSS office in Burlington serves the entire county, which covers 169 square miles. Public transportation does not serve the region, though a lack of transportation was not cited as a prevalent barrier for the elderly by stakeholders.

## **PROBLEMS AND ISSUES THAT AROSE**

While implementation of the CAB program unfolded relatively smoothly, it encountered a handful of important challenges, some of which could have had serious consequences if stakeholders had not found ready solutions. Program staff struggled with reaching seniors in the outskirts of the county, some clients did not think that commodities adequately met their dietary needs, and there was not adequate freezer space for both the second commodity shipment and surplus food left over from the initial shipment.

### **Reaching Potential Clients in Remote Areas**

Program staff initially intended to open drop-off sites to serve seniors scattered around the outskirts of Alamance County, but they never could identify a minimum threshold demand for commodities or find a large enough concentration of seniors to justify opening a second food distribution site. Perhaps a solution would have included investing additional resources in rural outreach strategies and a more extensive home delivery system.

## **Dietary Preferences**

DSS caseworkers and ACCSA staff heard some evidence that clients were concerned that the food packages did not meet their nutritional needs. Anecdotally, this was the case for seniors who had medical conditions such as high blood pressure or diabetes. One caseworker reported that about one-third of seniors participating in the demonstration worried that the food items were not appropriate for their specialized diets. Other seniors would have liked to receive the frozen meat and poultry in smaller portions. (The quantities were too large to defrost and prepare for a single-person household.) However, surveys conducted by MPR and by ACCSA did not identify significant dissatisfaction with the package contents.

## **Underestimated Freezer Space**

In making preparations for food storage, staff from ACCSA was unsure about the amount of space that it would need to accommodate frozen items. The first order contained an unexpected double order of frozen meat, and the organization did not have a formal contingency plan. The Alamance-Burlington school district quickly agreed to provide supplementary freezer space for the program's commodities as long as it was needed. ACCSA used the school's freezer space for overflow twice during the demonstration before purchasing two additional freezers.

## **SUCCESSFUL OUTCOMES**

North Carolina's commodity benefit option generated several successful outcomes. First, despite having to select a new subcontractor, other community partners quickly pulled together and implemented an effective food distribution system. Second, the food packages afforded some applicants with a higher value of food stamp benefits than they would have received under the regular program.

## **Effective Food Distribution Process**

Service delivery procedures ran very smoothly throughout the demonstration. VTA was well-suited for its role since it had much of the necessary facilities and equipment in place (for example, tow motors and storage racks). With the exception of freezer space, the large VTA warehouse could easily accommodate the constantly fluctuating amount of commodities that needed to be stored and the space needed to assemble commodity packages.

In addition, ACCSA and VTA cooperated to provide a client-friendly service environment. The warehouse in Burlington was a convenient, central location for many elderly residents, albeit not for those who lived several miles from the main town. Staff could arrange for home delivery for any senior who expressed or demonstrated a need.

### **Seniors Appreciate Commodities as Compared to EBT Benefits**

The commodity benefit option met the needs of some seniors better than traditional food stamps. CAB participants anecdotally reported to program staff that they found the frozen meat and poultry, as well as the fruit, to be particularly appealing. Others mentioned that the demonstration enabled them to try certain food items that they would not have purchased on their own. According to a customer satisfaction survey administered by ACCSA to 233 participants during the first six months, more than 99 percent were pleased with the services. Only one respondent took issue with the commodities, contending that the items did not fit a diabetic's diet.

The demonstration could be particularly appealing to those seniors who qualified only for the minimal food stamp benefit level. Some of them may not have been willing to go through the hassle of applying for only \$10 or \$20 on an EBT card, but conversely found that \$70 of food was worth the effort of dealing with the paperwork. Some seniors anecdotally told program staff or their caseworkers that the larger amounts of food that they received through the CAB program allowed them to have more disposable income to use for other purchases, such as prescription drugs.